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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000153

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT EYES PEACE TALKS, BUT SOME
HURDLES REMAIN

REF: MANILA 00128 (ARROYO CONGRATULATES PRESIDENT
OBAMA)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: At a private January 15 breakfast with the Ambassador, Presidential Peace Process Adviser Hermogenes Esperon was upbeat on prospects for peace with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao. With April as a new target date for a resumption of talks, Esperon said, the groundwork for new negotiations was falling into place: the government had reconstituted its peace panel, selected a chief negotiator, begun back-channeling with the Muslim rebels, and planned to approach the Malaysian facilitators. However, frustration with the Malaysians' role and lack of action on the part of the Muslim rebels to rein in their rogue commanders still loose in central Mindanao were some of the obstacles blocking a quick return to talks. Discussions with former British and Sinn Fein facilitators spurred the government to consider new ways to keep pushing forward, Esperon noted, perhaps by reworking last year's aborted Memorandum of Agreement on territory. The Ambassador encouraged Esperon to consider the benefits of an immediate end to fighting, at which point the U.S. could help a return to talks through an infusion of development aid for specific projects in Mindanao. Esperon complimented the Ambassador on the success of U.S. Civil-Military Operations projects in Mindanao and encouraged the U.S. to engage the Philippine military to do more. END SUMMARY.

PREPARING A NEW PATH TO PEACE TALKS

12. (C) Presidential Peace Process Adviser Hermogenes Esperon, at a private January 15 breakfast with the Ambassador, optimistically described the government's desire to return to peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and identified April as a realistic target date for the full resumption of talks. The effort to return to the negotiating table gained momentum earlier this month, Esperon said, with the selection of Department of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Rafael Seguis as chief negotiator on the government's peace panel and with back-channelling that confirmed the rebel group is "ready to talk." Government officials planned to travel to Kuala Lumpur to connect with the Malaysian facilitators, but the visit was postponed to the end of the month.

13. (C) Regarding the actual peace agreement, Esperon said the government was looking at ways it might break the impasse on the MILF's demands for the Memorandum of Agreement on territory to be revisited in the next phase of talks. Based on recent discussions in Manila with former British and Sinn Fein facilitators, Esperon noted there could be a way to "rework" the Agreement to everyone's satisfaction, in a

manner similar to how British and Northern Ireland negotiators reworked their agreement. The Philippine government's perspective on the role of Malaysia was also evolving, Esperon said, and there was more interest now in limiting the role of Malaysia to that of a true facilitator -- one that simply brings the parties together and helps bring new ideas to the table -- as opposed to their previous highly-involved role as a communications channel between the two parties.

OBSTACLES REMAIN

14. (C) Esperon admitted that several obstacles stood in the way of a full resumption of talks. With the Malaysian government transitioning to a new prime minister in March, Esperon was uncertain what the impact would be on the peace talks. The Philippine side was growing frustrated with the Malaysian tendency to delay their face-to-face meetings, Esperon said, and with the Malaysians' close relationship with the MILF, such that the MILF would not engage Philippine officials at all unless the Malaysian facilitators were present. The Malaysian facilitators expressed interest in rejoining the International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao, but Esperon acknowledged the Philippines was considering a new IMT format, splitting it into two parts: one for security led by Brunei, and one for economic development led by Japan, maintaining an as-of-yet undefined role for Malaysia.

15. (C) Turning to the situation on the ground in Mindanao, Esperon said the MILF had not yet relieved the three rogue

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MILF commanders of their military commands, as the group said it would do in response to the government's demand. Meanwhile, according to Esperon, the Philippine government remained engaged in targeted military operations against the MILF and had yet to shift its mindset from "war doctrine" to "peace doctrine." A transition to a peace-focused mindset and a return to peace talks, Esperon confided, would be made easier if the security situation improved.

U.S. HELPING PARTIES RETURN TO PEACE TALKS

16. (C) The Ambassador urged Esperon to weigh the benefits of ending fighting quickly; the security situation could improve once talks resumed. To encourage the parties to stop fighting and start talking, the Ambassador noted, the U.S. would provide development assistance upon the resumption of talks, supporting projects considered important by each side and executing them according to U.S. terms. Esperon was complimentary on the U.S. military's continued low profile during the Mindanao conflict, as well as on the success of the U.S. military's Civil-Military Operations, in which he suggested the U.S. encourage the Armed Forces of the Philippines to stay engaged.

KENNEY